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From Plato to Arnold: A Comparative Study of Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*

Platon'dan Arnold'a: Wordsworth'un Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* Üzerine Karşılaştırmalı Bir İnceleme

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Abstract: William Wordsworth, in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), redefined poetry by advocating for the representation of ordinary experiences in extraordinary ways, evoking sublime emotions in readers. While his ideas draw from predecessors such as Plato, Aristotle, Longinus, and Horace, as well as his contemporary Coleridge, Wordsworth's emphasis on imagination often overlooks critical engagement with earlier literary traditions. Matthew Arnold is included in this analysis as a comparative figure to highlight Wordsworth's shortcomings in balancing creative and critical faculties. Arnold's focus on synthesizing these elements offers a valuable contrast to Wordsworth's prioritization of imaginative powers. It is thus essential to examine the distinctions in Wordsworth's style compared to the thinkers above. The analysis provides valuable insights into diverse perspectives on the poet's role and the nature of poetry. Indeed, it becomes essential to unfold and unravel Wordsworth's understanding of poetry to draw parallels and to compare and contrast his ideas to gain knowledge on how poetry ought to be perceived. Present study examines Wordsworth's contributions through Arnold's critical lens, offering insights into the evolving role of the poet and the nature of poetry while addressing where Wordsworth may be critiqued for his limited critical scope.

Öz: William Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) adlı eserinde, sıradan insanın günlük deneyimlerinin yüce duygular uyandıracak şekilde sunulmasını savunarak şiir anlayışına yeni bir boyut kazandırmıştır. Wordsworth'ün fikirleri, Platon, Aristoteles, Longinus ve Horace gibi düşünürlerin yanı sıra çağdaşı Coleridge'in görüşleriyle de benzerlik taşımaktadır. Ancak, Wordsworth hayal gücüne öncelik verirken, Matthew Arnold eleştirel bakış açısı ve edebi geleneklerle ilişki eksikliğini eleştirmiştir. Arnold'un yaratıcı ve eleştirel yetilerin dengelenmesi gerektiğine dair vurgusu, Wordsworth'un yaklaşımını değerlendirmek için bir çerçeve sunmaktadır. Wordsworth'ün yaklaşımının, adı geçen sanatçılardan hangi yönlerde ayrıştığını incelemek ve şiirin rolüne dair çeşitli görüşleri ortaya koymak bu çalışma açısından büyük önem taşımaktadır. Bu bağlamda, Wordsworth'ün şiir anlayışını derinlemesine ele almak ve diğer yazarlarla karşılaştırmak hedeflenmiştir. Bu makale Wordsworth'ün fikirlerini Arnold'un görüşleriyle, edebi geleneklerle ve daha geniş bağlamdaki düşünce akımlarıyla karşılaştırarak şairin rolü ve şiirin doğasına dair yeni perspektifler sunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

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Introduction

The beginning of English Romanticism during the 18th century (from 1750 to 1850) was revolutionary in presenting new ideas to what had been hitherto unfamiliar and to some extent foreign to the readers. The era was considered to be a counterreaction to the Age of Enlightenment, whose main purpose was to bring forward rationalism based on science and scientific evidence to emphasize the reasonable and intellectual mind. Romanticism, on the other hand, shifted the focus to the emotions in mankind rather than merely focusing on rationality, arguing that it is through passions, feelings, and experiences that man is able to reach “emotional and intellectual depths.”²

This paper examines how William Wordsworth’s distinctive poetic vision—particularly his handling of what we might call “alienation” from nature, authenticity, and feeling—marks a departure from earlier literary traditions. In doing so, it will also highlight the research question: how does Wordsworth’s approach to poetry, as reflected in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, provide a unique framework for understanding the Romantic notion of alienation in contrast to preceding aesthetic norms? Addressing this question will clarify how Wordsworth negotiates the relationship between rationality and feeling, and how he re-engages readers estranged from the emotional core of life. Additionally, the paper will explain why thinkers like Matthew Arnold are included, as Arnold’s critical principles and emphasis on broad literary awareness help us evaluate the originality and comprehensiveness of Wordsworth’s poetic theory.

While introducing Wordsworth’s main ideas in writing his work, this paper will also comment on the key Romantic ideas predominant during the 18th century. It is also crucial to mention how Wordsworth and Samuel T. Coleridge are different in their respective approach. Although both have written *Lyrical Ballads* together and, to some extent express the same purpose for how poetry should be viewed, their means of conveying and expressing poetry are nonetheless different. Lastly, the report at hand will draw parallels to the ideas of Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Longinus as well as Matthew Arnold to see where Wordsworth’s contribution to poetry is similar and where he differs from his predecessors/contemporaries. These comparisons further illuminate how Wordsworth’s approach counters the intellectual and emotional alienation characteristic of previous eras and how Arnold’s perspective informs our understanding of Wordsworth’s critical limitations.

William Wordsworth’s Key Ideas in Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*

The English Romantic poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was one of the pioneering figures who, together with his companion Coleridge, marked the beginning of Romanticism with his contribution to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Different from the Age of Enlightenment, the Romantic era worked to render the sublime using poetry.

To state, however, that there is a distinct line when it comes to the prevalent ideas during the Age of Enlightenment and Romanticism would be erroneous as the former “did not totally abandon emotion”, likewise, the latter did not wholly “reject rationalism”.³ In that respect, one could argue that even though Romanticism offered new perspectives on how to perceive literature, it was at the same time influenced and its basis reshuffled by previous thought patterns. Nevertheless, this process was done in a way that brought the theme of the sublime to the foreground and with ideas that sought to reshape earlier understandings of poetry.⁴ Wordsworth “brings reason and wonder together, calling the imagination ‘the highest reason in a soul sublime’”.⁵ Hence, Wordsworth sought to redefine poetry on his own terms and thus states in his Preface what the reader can expect in *Lyrical Ballads*. At the beginning of the Preface, Wordsworth also mentions that his

² Morse Peckham, “Toward a Theory of Romanticism,” *PMLA* 66, no. 2, (1951): 20.

³ Joanne Schneider, *The Age of Romanticism* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2007), 1.

⁴ Kari Elise Lokke, “The Role of Sublimity in the Development of Modernist Aesthetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 40, no. 4, (1982): 421-422.

⁵ Joel Faflak, and Julia M. Wright, eds *A Handbook of Romanticism Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 64.



work was in its essence an “experiment” to test “the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation”.⁶ Not thinking that his writings would be regarded as poetry by some as his writing style and content differed from earlier traditions, he was surprised to find out that his new type of poetry was received well above his expectations.⁷ In his Preface, Wordsworth clarifies the very aim of this new poetry, which according to him should address the “low and rustic life” because through it, “the essential passions the heart find a better soil ... and speak a plainer and more emphatic language”.⁸ It was his objective to convey the otherwise inexpressible ideas of poetry by way of the common and the ordinary while appealing to the universality of human emotions. In emphasizing low and rustic life, Wordsworth also counters the alienation wrought by industrialization and elite literary traditions, re-centering poetry on experiences accessible to ordinary people.

When Wordsworth writes that he wants to simplify the language of poetry, it is also crucial to note that he at the same time thinks of poetry to be written by chosen poets whose vocation is

[...] endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him.⁹

Hence, a differentiation between the common man and the poet is made in Wordsworth’s Preface, where he deliberately distinguishes the powerful qualities and duties of the poet in contrast to “other men”.¹⁰

As such, it is “through the mouths of his characters” that the poet speaks while instructing mankind on the truth in a language they can understand.¹¹ Not only is the form of the poem simple in its arrangement of rhyme and meter - and therefore also grammatically plain – the poems should also serve to be semantically pure and “universally intelligible”.¹² This ability is reserved for the designated poet, as he can “conjure up in himself passions [...] other men are accustomed to feel in themselves”.¹³ The relatable and straightforward language is then transmitted to every man “in a manner which [they] associate ideas in a state of excitement”.¹⁴

Experience is another vital point in Wordsworth’s understanding of “good poetry”. For Wordsworth, the mind has been dulled by writings on sensational and national events such as the Industrial Revolution, which has led to people incessantly having “a craving for extraordinary incident”.¹⁵ Rather than focusing on “violent stimulants”, as Wordsworth puts it, the poet should turn ordinary experiences into extraordinary ones by making the reader discover new, strange, and unfamiliar perspectives from common life. Poetry, Wordsworth argues, is a way for the common man to reform or defamiliarize the familiar experience and to see it with fresh eyes where “the poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration”.¹⁶ Poetry, however, should be presented in such a way that it does not afflict pain on the reader. Not appearing too overwhelming nor staggering for the reader, poetry should thus be simple in its form while functioning to soften the emotional experience with trivial and common life situations.¹⁷ At the same time, Wordsworth aims to transform the mundane “in an unusual way”, seeking to excite and inspire to such an extent that the reader is filled with

⁶ William Wordsworth, “Preface to Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems (1802),” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, gen. ed. Vincent B. Leitch, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc, 2001), 648.

⁷ Wordsworth, “Preface to Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems (1802),” 648.

⁸ Wordsworth, 650.

⁹ Wordsworth, 655.

¹⁰ Wordsworth, 656.

¹¹ Wordsworth, 658.

¹² Wordsworth, 650.

¹³ Wordsworth, 656.

¹⁴ Wordsworth, 650.

¹⁵ Wordsworth, 652.

¹⁶ Wordsworth, 658.

¹⁷ Wordsworth, 656.

passion and, therefore, reawakened, thus seeing the world anew.¹⁸ This attempt to defamiliarize the familiar directly confronts the sense of alienation that comes from viewing the world through a purely rational or utilitarian lens.

To convey “the sublime notion of Poetry”, the poet’s essential duty is also to be emotionally recollected.¹⁹ After having gathered his ideas over a period of time in tranquility and in a much-composed mindset, the poet can then be able to pour down his poetic experience.²⁰ When the right time comes for the poet to render what is in his mind, it is then regarded to be *good poetry*, because as Wordsworth asserts, the recollection of experience(s) has now turned into a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”.²¹ The process of tranquility to collect thoughts and experiences is therefore not based on immediate events, but rather on powerful poetic creativity over a certain time period, which is finally triggered by inspiration. A prime example of this is to be found in the first lines of Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” (1798) “Five years have past; five summers, with the length / Of five long winters! and again I hear / These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs / With a soft inland murmur”.²² It can be inferred from the above excerpt that the poet has spent five years pondering and gathering poetic experiences for then to transfer them to the reader. For Wordsworth, this is not a quality that everyone can practice; it takes great patience where the poet has to enter into a somewhat semi-divine and metaphysical sphere to “lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration”.²³ Hence, as with, for instance, “Tintern Abbey” as well as “Daffodils” (1807), Wordsworth expresses the role of the divine poet in stating that he has to transform and transfigure elementary feelings and experiences which can merely take place with a poet’s special consciousness and awareness. In doing so, the poet therefore animates, vivifies, and to a great extent inspires life into experiences that otherwise may seem tedious due to people perceiving experiences without reacting to them in an energetic/responsive way.²⁴

It is also worth mentioning the difference between Coleridge’s and Wordsworth’s viewpoints on poetry. Although they have agreed on writing the Preface together, they nonetheless differ in their ways of interpreting the purpose of poetry. Their shared fundamental basis, however, is to generate ideas on the strange/familiar experiences, though both writers have decided to approach this project in their own particular ways. Where Wordsworth endeavors to defamiliarize the otherwise common situations, Coleridge has made it his mission to turn the strange into what is common and familiar to his reader.²⁵ Just as Wordsworth values feelings to be elemental, Coleridge puts imagination first while having a more philosophical outlook on the aim of poetry. For him then, the supernatural was born out of the divine and the energetic imagination, and “the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real”.²⁶ The gist of truth is therefore for Coleridge to draw out the inward, alien, and supernatural experiences of man for the sake of creating poetry and transfigure them into what is common and familiar. Wordsworth’s objective, however, is, as Coleridge puts it, “to give charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural”.²⁷ Coleridge, with his works such as *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1834) as well as *Kubla Khan* (1816) also presents to the reader his purpose with poetry; he displays uncanny creatures in sublime, mystic and natural environments together with the powerful forces of imagination and creativity. The unrealistic and supernatural are transformed into reality and actuality in Coleridge’s version of poetry while for Wordsworth it is indeed the reverse. Even though this is the basic distinction

¹⁸ Wordsworth, 650.

¹⁹ Wordsworth, 661.

²⁰ Wordsworth, 661.

²¹ Wordsworth, 651.

²² William Wordsworth, “The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth,” *Project Gutenberg*. Vol. 2, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12145/12145-h/12145-h.htm>, 2018, Lines 1-4.

²³ Wordsworth, “Preface to Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems (1802),” 658.

²⁴ Wordsworth, 650.

²⁵ Samuel T. Coleridge, “From The Stateman’s Manual”, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, gen. ed. Vincent B. Leitch, (New York W. W. Norton & Company Inc, 2001), 677.

²⁶ Coleridge, “From The Stateman’s Manual,” 677.

²⁷ Coleridge, 677.



between Wordsworth and Coleridge, both use the dual spheres of strange/familiar to achieve their versions of what they perceive to be “good poetry”.

This distinction with Coleridge further emphasizes Wordsworth’s unique angle. While Coleridge focuses on integrating the uncanny into the known, Wordsworth works more directly with the sense of alienation from everyday life, striving to highlight the extraordinary in the ordinary and thus reconnecting the reader with dimensions of experience that might otherwise remain unknown.

The Relation(s) Between Wordsworth’s Understanding of Poetry and Classical Ideas

Wordsworth seems to have similar ideas as Plato when he states that he seeks to achieve the “supreme good” in poetry. Both Plato and Wordsworth regard emotions and inspiration to be the origin of poetry while also viewing the immanent to be the very source of nature and God.²⁸ As such, both perceive poetry to be inspired and communicated through God, and therefore the poet is also deemed holy. Yet, whereas Plato labels poetry as “a form of divine madness”²⁹ in which stirring emotions deceive mankind, Wordsworth considers feelings to be superior and above the faculty of reason. Although Plato and Wordsworth have the same ideas regarding the source of poetry and the poet’s sanctified role in this position, they differ in their understanding of how to reach a higher state of being, that is, an elevation of the mind.³⁰ Plato’s argument on the heart being both physically and therefore metaphysically inferior to reason and intellect is also crucial when comparing it to Wordsworth’s ideas which are drenched with the romantic form and discourse at the time.

Unlike Plato, Wordsworth regards poetry to stem from transforming and ‘moving’ passions, so to speak, with which the individual is able to connect to wisdom in this way to achieve the ultimate aim of awareness/enlightenment. For Wordsworth, man without pleasure “has no knowledge”.³¹ Just as Wordsworth contributed to criticizing earlier traditions of how poetry was perceived, such as during the Age of Enlightenment, he also challenged the Classical world. During the Age of Enlightenment, “The Man of Science” was under scrutiny because of his inability to view scientific wisdom about the exceptional role of emotions without the former refuting the latter.³² Similarly, Wordsworth also negates Plato, though at first, their ideas seem similar concerning where poetry stems from. However, Wordsworth argues for the praising and the supremacy of emotions because Plato downsizes the emotional faculty of man for the very reason that it is “primitive and disruptive to the normal and optimal function of mind”.³³

Wordsworth’s ideas on poetry are also similar to Aristotle’s in some ways while also different in others. It is worth mentioning that both are similar in their ways of wanting to portray the universality of actions in men. ‘Mimesis’ is an essential term here, because the representation of common actions where the individual can recognize him/herself in the story or the poem is a point both Aristotle and Wordsworth highlight.³⁴ Nevertheless, whereas Aristotle strives to depict the experiences of noblemen in his plots, Wordsworth appeals to men from all classes with his poetry so that his writing can be relatable and universal for all. Yet again, one could argue that Aristotle and Wordsworth are similar in this regard when considering that Aristotle’s tragedies illustrate universal feelings in mankind, though the plot concentrates on aristocratic heroes.

However, Wordsworth departs from Aristotle by refusing to rely on the perfection-seeking hero’s journey. Instead, he underscores the alienation and subsequent reconnection accessible through common life situations. This difference

²⁸ Plato, “‘Ion’ and ‘From Republic,’” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, gen. ed. Vincent B. Leitch, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 35.

²⁹ Plato, “‘Ion’ and ‘From Republic,’” 35.

³⁰ Plato, 36.

³¹ William Wordsworth, “Preface to Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems (1802),” 657.

³² Wordsworth, 657.

³³ Jing Zhu, and Paul Thagard, “Emotion and Action,” *Philosophical Psychology* 15(1), no.19, (2006): 20.

³⁴ Aristotle, “Poetics,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, gen. ed. Vincent B. Leitch, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 88.



emphasizes Wordsworth's refusal to accept hierarchical norms, choosing rather to highlight how simple, ordinary experiences can reinvigorate emotional depth.

There is another crucial point, however, when it comes to the 'mimesis' of reality; Aristotle emphasizes that life should be presented to its audience as it should be by regenerating "that internal movement of things toward their perfection".³⁵ Aristotle stressed the Platonic ideals of how objects as well as human beings "tend to perfection" while accentuating their constant "enactment of [their] potential".³⁶ In his *Poetics*, Aristotle highlights how the poet should "make them [the heroes] be decent people who are of those sorts, as Homer made Achilles good and also a model of hardness".³⁷ Hence for Aristotle, people are always striving for perfection in the stories as it is the duty of the Aristotelian poet, whereas Wordsworth aims to represent life *as it is*:

The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to [choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and, the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way].³⁸

As shown above, Wordsworth wishes to twist the ordinary experiences of men *as they are* into defamiliarized and strange forms to make people (re)live events spiritually and excitingly. Another significant distinction between Aristotle and Wordsworth is that the former cannot think of poetry without its plot, whereas the latter deems the faculty of emotions and the individual over the storyline/event. Aristotle perceives poetry as incomplete if the poet is unable to fixate on the plot from which everything else unfolds: "a poet must be a composer of plots...(he) represents actions... that have happened from being the sort of things that may happen according to probability".³⁹ In this way, Aristotle regards a plot to be the "soul" without which a story cannot possibly evolve.⁴⁰

Moreover, Aristotle's clearly defined rules on how tragedy or a story should be is also overturned by Wordsworth's introduction of a new type of poetry in his Preface. Aristotle's well-known and indispensable key concepts e.g., hamartia, peripeteia, anagnorisis, catastrophe, and catharsis add to the abovementioned "soul of tragedy", while for Wordsworth, it is imperative to break previously established tendencies and rules on how poetry was perceived and received. A similarity that can be found in both Wordsworth and Aristotle is their way of constructing art in such a manner that it can have a didactic and moralistic purpose for its audience. Aristotle does this implicitly with, for instance, catharsis where, at the end of the play, one feels purged of negative feelings such as pity and fear.⁴¹ Through tragedy, the moral aspect of what is deemed right and wrong in society is laid out for the spectator so that s/he can ponder on the consequences of the hero's actions. In that respect, how one ought to behave in terms of social and moral codes of conduct is emphasized in Aristotle's idea of tragedy. The didactic element in Wordsworth's poetry is also present, though implicitly just like in Aristotle's representation of his stories. Both then wish to invoke intellectual growth for the reader by way of instructing and delighting simultaneously.

Turning to Horace's understanding of the poem's didactic purpose, it is worth considering his ideas compared to Wordsworth's. Horace's instructive aim is presented more explicitly, and Ciplak also argues that all three, Aristotle, Horace, and Wordsworth, have met to discuss the issue of "affective theory that deals with the readers' psychological responses, emotions, literary tastes and moral understanding".⁴² The message that poetry should both "delight and instruct" is quite forthright in Horace's writing style. He repeatedly states that "the man who combines pleasure with

³⁵ Augusto Boal, *The Theatre of the Oppressed*, (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 10.

³⁶ Boal, *The Theatre of the Oppressed*, 10.

³⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Joe Sachs, (Bemidji: Focus Publishing, 2006), 42-43.

³⁸ William Wordsworth, "Preface to Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems (1802)," 650.

³⁹ Selin Ciplak, "The Idea of "Delight and Instruct" in Aristotle's Poetics, Horace's Ars Poetica and William Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads," *ZKÜ Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 2, no. 4, (2006): 214.

⁴⁰ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 28.

⁴¹ Ciplak, "The Idea of "Delight and Instruct" in Aristotle's Poetics, Horace's Ars Poetica and William Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads," 215.

⁴² Ciplak, 212.



usefulness wins every suffrage, delighting the reader and also giving him advice".⁴³ While Horace's idea of "delight and instruct" is visible in his definition of poetry, Wordsworth's indirect way of teaching is more convoluted just as with Longinus' rendering of the sublime.

Wordsworth is in line with Longinus when it comes to both poets' perceptions of the didactic and emotional aspects of poetry. Longinus argues for the "greatness of thought" and the sublime through "[...] deep feelings, profound thoughts, and natural genius: "Sublimity is the echo of a noble mind." Often the experience of reading a great author or listening to a great speech leads us to a feeling of ecstasy or transport (ekstasis)".⁴⁴

One can understand through this passage how much Longinus values the importance of elevating and uplifting the spirit to such an extent that one is utterly transformed as if struck by a thunderbolt.⁴⁵ Like Longinus, Wordsworth also gives priority to inspiration and sublimity through feelings rather than the intellectual mind. The reader can through the sublime power of feelings both experience the pleasing side of poetry as well as learn from the poet. Instead of focusing on the structure of rhetoric form, discursive strategies, and literary style, Longinus emphasizes the "profound feelings" that poetry evokes which Plato and Wordsworth also shed light on. Horace is therefore different from Plato, Longinus, and Wordsworth, tending to be more of Aristotelian tradition when he prioritizes the "rhetorical strategies rather than the erratic genius of authors".⁴⁶ Different from Wordsworth, instruction through "formal techniques" rather than inspiration is at the center of Horace's definition of poetry.⁴⁷

In sum, by examining Wordsworth's connections to Classical theories, we see how he appropriates and sometimes resists their frameworks. His subtle emphasis on alienation—redirecting attention from the extraordinary to the ordinary—highlights his unique Romantic strategy of reawakening feeling within a world increasingly distanced from authentic emotional experience.

Matthew Arnold and William Wordsworth

Another prominent English poet and literary critic is Matthew Arnold from the Victorian era. He laid the foundations of literary criticism with his contributions, particularly in his well-known book *Function of Criticism at the Present Time* (1865). In his book, Arnold makes it clear to the reader that one ought to understand knowledge without imposing certain subjective ideas such as political, religious, philosophical, or ideological views.⁴⁸ Indeed, Arnold is regarded to be the cornerstone of modern contemporary criticism as his ideas seek to establish an objective view of written works. It is firstly crucial to elaborate on his basic ideas both when it comes to literature and criticism, in Arnold's words "the free creative activity" and the "critical power", for then to put his ideas to Wordsworth.⁴⁹

Arnold is introduced here because his critical principles provide a lens through which we can assess whether Wordsworth's approach—particularly his limited engagement with prior traditions and his focus on alienation and sublime feeling—is sufficiently comprehensive. By examining Arnold's emphasis on the interplay between critical and creative faculties, we see more clearly what Wordsworth's Preface achieves and what it might lack.

Arnold argues that the creative faculty stands above the critical one. However, after stating this, he goes further and emphasizes that, in essence, the former cannot exist without the latter.⁵⁰ The inventive mind is significant and much more

⁴³ Horace, "Ars Poetica," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, gen. ed. Vincent B. Leitch, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 132.

⁴⁴ Horace, "Ars Poetica," 135.

⁴⁵ Longinus, "From on Sublimity," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, gen. ed. Vincent B. Leitch, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 152.

⁴⁶ Horace, "Ars Poetica," 136.

⁴⁷ Horace, 136.

⁴⁸ Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, gen. ed. Vincent B. Leitch, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 806.

⁴⁹ Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," 808.

⁵⁰ Arnold, 808.

harmless in circumstances where it can be misleading or erroneous: “false or malicious criticism may do much injury to the minds of others: a stupid invention, either in prose or verse, is quite harmless”.⁵¹ In this way, Arnold distinguishes between the creative and the critical powers, yet not in the way that one should understand them in separate terms. Quite the contrary, both faculties should be interpreted in a synthesized approach. Arnold argues that writers such as Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Coleridge had great creative powers, and the epochs in which they created their works, namely the Renaissance and the Napoleonic era, were greatly convenient for them to present what they had for the public. As such, not only should the writer possess excellent qualities to render in his writing, but the epoch should also be available for them to nourish their ideas. Moreover, society should be able to supply proper intellectual ideas as well as materials with which writers can mold their imaginative ideas into their creations.⁵² A harmony between “the power of the man and the power of the moment” should be able to coexist for writers to create “the best that is known and thought in the world”.⁵³ Whereas literary writers use ideas from their imagination to create something new, critics utilize already existing ideas, and therefore, it becomes even more important for their circumstances to make these available for them.

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the literary mind, though it ranks higher than the critical one, should be seen in the light of literary work and vice versa. Despite the fullness of English literature dominating the highlighted eras, the English world lacked and desired the power of criticism that countries like Germany and France possessed.⁵⁴ Hence, it is crucial to intermingle the traditions of both literary and critical faculties to create superior works, Arnold asserts. Wordsworth is a prime example of the English tendency as he prioritizes the inventive/imaginary powers over the critical tradition. Although Arnold and Wordsworth seem to agree on this particular point, it is nonetheless salient to consider where they differ. Despite Wordsworth’s critical contribution and position in his Preface, he could not succeed in creating sufficient critical works to synthesize with the inventive powers of the mind.⁵⁵

The purpose of great work is thus to find a deliberate balance with both faculties coinciding while also providing equal attention to both. Unlike Wordsworth, Arnold writes, that Goethe was able to deliver an abundance of critical works after having gained knowledge from different cultures and times.⁵⁶ Indeed, a great critical work, according to Arnold, consists of intertwined and interwoven ideas dating back from ancient Greek writings and up to contemporary society. The role of the critic then is to be well-read and well-aware of not only the works within the borders of one’s own country but also acquire knowledge from across borders, cultures, and languages. Thus, even though Arnold praises Wordsworth’s inventive creativity, he at the same time criticizes him for not being sufficiently well-read. That is, Wordsworth does not produce works with satisfactory awareness of earlier traditions, at least not fully and in an exhaustive manner it deserves:

But surely the one thing wanting to make Wordsworth an even greater poet than he is, - his thought richer, and his influence of wider application, - was that he should have read more books, among them, no doubt, those of that Goethe whom he disparaged without reading him.⁵⁷

The above passage stresses Arnold’s earlier point of making “the best ideas prevail”.⁵⁸ The duty of the critic seems to be more complicated than first assumed as criticism embraces “flexibility, openness to new experiences, and curiosity”.⁵⁹ Moreover, the critic should also act as a mediator between the work he is presenting and the general public. S/he therefore has a specific role to present and prevail the best of ideas after having created works out of previous ideas. Though Arnold implicitly criticizes Wordsworth for not possessing these qualities, it could be argued that both writers resemble each

⁵¹ Arnold, 807.

⁵² Arnold, 810.

⁵³ Arnold, 808-815.

⁵⁴ Arnold, 806

⁵⁵ Arnold, 808.

⁵⁶ Arnold, 809.

⁵⁷ Arnold, 809.

⁵⁸ Arnold, 809.

⁵⁹ Arnold, 805.

other in their statement of the artist's "chosen" position to render new ideas to society; not everybody can meet the criteria of accomplishing what is expected of him/her, which leads this paper to the following section about the artist's role as a critic.

Arnold subsequently moves on to explain the objectives that the critical mind should fulfill. "Disinterestedness" is a concept that is quite essential in his depiction of the ideal critic. One striving to render "the best that is known and thought in the world" while seeking "the object as in itself it really is" should be able to distance him/herself from any ideological preconceptions or ideas.⁶⁰ It is of utmost importance that the critic renders his views without certain etiquettes of thought patterns nor with any biases involved in his writing. The critic, then, knowing both past and present cultures of the world, should act with a "free play of the mind" continually aiming to make the best of ideas dominate in world literature ⁶¹

The grand work of literary genius is a work of synthesis and exposition, not of analysis and discovery; its gift lies in the faculty of being happily inspired by a certain intellectual and spiritual atmosphere, by a certain order of ideas, when it finds itself in them; of dealing divinely with these ideas, presenting them in the most effective and attractive combinations, – making beautiful works with them, in short.⁶²

The purpose of creative activity is then, as mentioned in the extract, to achieve ultimate happiness to feel alive.⁶³ It can be achieved both through literary and critical creations, however, without a synthesis of both faculties it becomes impossible to achieve either of them.

Arnold's suggested principles on the critic's role in the world of both literature and criticism resemble Aristotle's analytic ideas on art and how art should be unfolded. Their similarity originates in both of them wanting to deliver poems in their best shape and form; Aristotle puts forward a set of principles that the poet should follow and Arnold introduces a guideline for the selection of best ideas (in poems etc.) which then should prosper for the sake of one's duty to society.

Arnold is also similar to Plato in his ideas of acquiring knowledge from different fields, which requires a deep sense of awareness of "all crafts, all human affairs".⁶⁴ However, unlike Plato, Arnold puts the creative faculty above the rational mind. Where Plato, and Horace for that matter, state that the origin of literature is learning and therefore its position has to be considered more important than inspiration, Arnold thinks that creativity and imagination should be the poet's starting point from which the critical faculty can develop. Hence, Arnold seems to have similar ideas when viewed to Plato and Aristotle, yet at the same time, he is distinct in his arguments surrounding the rational and creative faculties of man.

Having explicated Arnold's perception of the critic to the literary writers, it is now crucial to sum up his ideas within a framework of a three-fold representation; firstly, the critic must gain knowledge that stretches beyond one's own contemporary society, secondly, s/he should act as a mediator, informing and "propagating" the general public about the best of ideas (after scrutinizing and choosing from among ideas), and ultimately, the critic creates a social atmosphere in which future artists can be intellectually stimulated.⁶⁵ As such, the critic not only ponders about generating new knowledge produced out of existing patterns at present/past time but also gives thought to future generations so that future artists can carry on manifesting the best of ideas.

At times, Arnold seems to be contradictory in his theories for even when he states that great works were created out of the Napoleonic period with the French Revolution, he also criticizes it for being of "political, practical character".⁶⁶ If an epoch should create an intellectual atmosphere where artists can produce their great works, then it should be devoid

⁶⁰ Arnold, 810.

⁶¹ Arnold, 814.

⁶² Arnold, 808.

⁶³ Arnold, 810.

⁶⁴ Plato, "'Ion' and 'From Republic'," 36.

⁶⁵ Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," 808-810.

⁶⁶ Arnold, 819.

of all practical and ideological matters. Rather than having a political agenda, the critic should place his/her work within an intellectual context. The French Revolution, Arnold asserts, influenced far too many works to be written on political and practical concerns.⁶⁷ However, Arnold stresses that this leads to a distorted view of a great work and even prevents the artists from creating new ideas out of an intellectual mindset.

Another point that seems conflicting and ironic is Arnold's statement about the creative faculty being more valuable than the critical one. While putting forward his argument about these two fields and their positions about one another, Arnold then concludes that both are equally significant in the creation of "best ideas". Hence, he seems to break down his own created order of these concepts when he highlights the importance both carry. One might also wonder how exactly "the best that is known and thought in the world"⁶⁸ can be defined and whether deciding this would also lead to subjective viewpoints in the general picture of his theory. Furthermore, this critique of Arnold gives rise to another question; even though the most well-read of artists are to generate new ideas on literary works, can there be a possible clash among what artists believe to be "the best of ideas"? If so, then how is this "conflict" to be solved? The answers to these and other critical questions of Arnold remain unclear, however, one can undoubtedly state that he contributed to the modern contemporary criticism of the present day with his crucial ideas on how to approach world literature with a critical eye.

Conclusion

To conclude, Wordsworth introduces in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* a new type of poetry while negating earlier traditions of how poetry was defined. With his companion Coleridge, they aim, in their respective ways, to present a form of poetry whose basis is to render the strange/peculiar in a familiar/recognizable way, and vice versa, by perceiving feelings (Wordsworth) and imagination (Coleridge) at the very heart of poetry. Not only is Wordsworth inspired by ideas from the Classical world (albeit inadequately, according to Arnold), but he is also there to challenge them; indeed, he may resemble his predecessors Plato, Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus in his theories, yet he demonstrates his distinctive version of poetry by promoting a new "type", which marks the beginning of Romanticism and thus paves the way for other works to develop in his "tradition". However, Arnold criticizes Wordsworth for not being sufficiently well-read when it comes to utilizing earlier ideas from various subject matters. Though Arnold, like Wordsworth, regards the inventive powers above the rational mind, he nonetheless accentuates Wordsworth's lack of critical insight in the form of extensive awareness of literary ideas.

In short, Wordsworth's vision is unique not simply for its turn to emotion and common life but for its attempt to counter the alienation that developed from Enlightenment rationalism and industrial modernity. He seeks to restore a direct, authentic connection between human beings and their experiences. By comparing Wordsworth's perspective to those of his predecessors and contemporaries, as well as examining Arnold's critical response, it becomes clear that Wordsworth's "experiment" contributed significantly to reshaping the contours of poetic theory. The implications of this analysis suggest that Wordsworth's approach—the mingling of emotional depth, alienation from rational conventions, and the elevation of common life—opened new pathways for understanding the role of poetry. Future research might further explore how his distinct emphasis on re-engaging an alienated reader resonates with contemporary approaches in literary criticism, reaffirming Wordsworth's lasting impact on how we read, interpret, and value poetry. Thus, this paper has examined Wordsworth's ideas within both classical and contemporary critical frameworks while demonstrating his understanding of poetry in light of Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Longinus, Coleridge, and Arnold.

Extended Abstract

The emergence of English Romanticism during the late 18th century marked a transformative shift in literary paradigms, challenging the dominant Enlightenment ideals of rationalism and scientific empiricism. Rooted in the belief that emotions and subjective experience were central to human understanding, Romanticism prioritized the exploration of passions and feelings as essential for accessing "emotional and intellectual depths." William Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) exemplifies this Romantic approach, offering a revolutionary vision for poetry that focused on

⁶⁷ Arnold, 810.

⁶⁸ Arnold, 815.



authenticity, the sublime, and ordinary life experiences. This paper investigates how Wordsworth's poetic principles address themes of alienation, authenticity, and emotional connection, establishing a framework for Romantic literature's redefinition of poetic purpose. It further contextualizes Wordsworth's contributions within classical literary traditions and evaluates his critical reception, particularly through the lens of Matthew Arnold.

Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* serves as a platform for Romantic poetry, challenging earlier aesthetic norms by emphasizing simplicity in language. Central to Wordsworth's poetic vision was the idea that "good poetry" arises from the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" recollected in tranquility. This notion underscored the Romantic emphasis on emotional authenticity, proposing that poetic inspiration stemmed from deep introspection and imaginative engagement with the natural world. Wordsworth's reflective process is exemplified in poems such as "Tintern Abbey," where the passage of time enhances the poet's capacity to render profound emotional experiences. By transforming ordinary events into extraordinary insights, Wordsworth's poetry sought to inspire a renewed sense of wonder and emotional vitality in his readers.

This paper also highlights the distinctions between Wordsworth and his contemporary Samuel Taylor Coleridge, despite their shared objective of redefining poetic norms. While Wordsworth aimed to defamiliarize the ordinary, Coleridge sought to naturalize the supernatural. For instance, Coleridge's works like *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan* exemplify his imaginative focus on mystical and uncanny experiences, in contrast with Wordsworth's emphasis on the emotional resonance of everyday life. This difference underscores the multifaceted nature of Romanticism, where individual poets pursued unique methods.

Wordsworth's ideas were influenced by classical thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus. This paper examines how Wordsworth's Romantic ideals align with and diverge from his predecessors. For instance, Wordsworth's emphasis on emotions echoes Longinus's notion of the sublime, where profound feelings elevate the human spirit. Similarly, his focus on mimesis—the representation of universal truths through art—parallels Aristotle's ideas, though Wordsworth democratizes this concept by depicting the lives of common people rather than aristocratic heroes. Unlike Horace, who prioritized formal techniques and explicit didacticism, Wordsworth utilized a subtler approach to teaching through emotional engagement and imaginative transformation.

The paper further explores the critical reception of Wordsworth's poetic theory, particularly through Matthew Arnold's Victorian-era perspectives. Arnold's emphasis on the balance between creative and critical faculties provides a valuable framework for evaluating Wordsworth's contributions. While Arnold admired Wordsworth's imaginative depth, he critiqued his lack of engagement with broader literary traditions, arguing that a more extensive critical awareness could have enriched Wordsworth's work. This interplay reflects broader debates within literary criticism regarding the balance between innovation and tradition.

Despite these critiques, Wordsworth's influence on poetic theory is undeniable. By emphasizing the transformative potential of ordinary experiences, he redefined the scope of poetry and challenged readers to reconnect with their emotional and imaginative capacities. His contributions not only established the foundations of Romanticism but also paved the way for later critical movements, shaping contemporary approaches to literature and aesthetics.

This paper concludes by placing Wordsworth's poetic vision within a broader intellectual and historical context. His response to Enlightenment rationalism and industrial modernity reveals an immense concern with the alienation of human beings from their emotional and spiritual selves. By engaging with classical ideas and reinterpreting them through a Romantic lens, Wordsworth offered a new model for poetry.

In sum, Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* is a groundbreaking work that not only defines the Romantic movement but also provides a timeless framework for understanding the role of poetry in human life. By examining his ideas alongside those of his contemporaries and predecessors, this paper demonstrates how Wordsworth's unique blend of emotional depth, imaginative insight, and social critique continues to inspire and challenge readers and scholars alike.



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